



IN THE PINK IN .
Slovenia

IN SLOVENIA FOR ITS ANNUAL PINK WEEK, CARY GEE
DISCOVERED A GLITTERING CENTRAL EUROPEAN GEM

Be honest. What's the first thing you think of when I mention Slovenia? Maybe you're trying to remember exactly which bit of the former Yugoslavia it is, or, thinking, didn't I once see Slovenia in the Eurovision Song Contest, cavorting to an accordion in natty peasant chic? Maybe you've a vague recollection of seeing Slovenians whizzing down the piste at the Winter Olympics or know someone who went to Ljubljana for their stag do. If that's all you know, then you need to read this.

We flew to Slovenia to enjoy Pink Week, a trip organised by the lovely chaps at luxuryslovenia.eu, for whom, apparently, no detail is too small to be overlooked, in order to present Slovenia as a must-visit destination for LGBT travellers. To be honest, Slovenia is a pretty easy sell.

Stretching from the Alps to the Mediterranean, Slovenia is a glittering central European gem. Bordered by Croatia to the South, Austria to the North, and Hungary to the East, it is perhaps to its north-western neighbour, Italy, that Slovenia bears the closest physical resemblance.

The view from the poolside terrace of our first destination, Hotel Gredic, near the small town of Dobrovo, a modestly proportioned 16th-century castle that has been lovingly transformed into a luxury hotel, could easily be a view of nearby Tuscany, unsurprising given that Italy is, in fact, just a five minute walk across the nearest vineyard.

Vineyards stretch in every direction. No space in this small republic of fewer than 3m inhabitants is considered too small or too unproductive to grow grapes, and the resulting wines are fabulous. There is a huge cellar beneath the surface luxury of the Gredic, boasting wine to suit every palette.

Not sure if you'd prefer a local red or one of the majority white wines? I'd recommend the sparkling Rebula — think of a fine dry prosecco, then halve the price tag — you can always take part in a wine quiz which the hotel Sommelier will host for 25 euros per guest. I can think of few more enjoyable ways to improve your knowledge. Ours was a riot of competition and threw up more than a few surprises, none more surprising than the fact that such great wine can be enjoyed at such low cost.

Of course, it's not strictly necessary to dine well in order to drink well. Nonetheless the Brda region of Slovenia boasts some seriously good cuisine, and most local hostleries will offer a taster menu, often including the famous local "white Polenta" as an excuse to show off the contents of the cellar. Fortunately the mountains and forests (which cover 70 per cent of the Slovenian landscape) offer ample opportunities to work off the inevitable weight gained from such consistently delicious tucker. If you really feel too fat to hike then hire a car and explore the picture-perfect villages such as Smartno which are strung atop mountain peaks like jewels on chains. Roads here are all but devoid of traffic, just keep a look out for tractors and be sure to buy some cherries, the symbol of Brda, from the roadside. They're delicious.

After all that gluttony you may need to a few days in a spa. We spent a night at the Balnea Wellness Centre in Dolenjske Toplice. Slovenians have been recuperating at this thermal spa for ever, and it's easy to see why. We stayed at the

historic Balnea hotel, in a balconied room as large as my London flat. A glass tunnel leads directly to an outdoor and an indoor pool, sauna, steam and treatment rooms, or if you really can't be bothered with all that "wellness" enjoy an excellent local beer in one of the many pubs minutes from the hotel. At 2 euros for a large draft beer mine certainly made me feel better.

Slovenia's economy is essentially rural, and no sight exemplifies this more than the sight of hay drying in a traditional Slovenian hayrack. Every field not given over to wine production boasts at least one. You can look at them, and think ah, cute, you can lunch under one, you can even get married in one — and that means you too. This year Slovenia became the first former communist country to allow its citizens to enter a same-sex marriage. As a country Slovenia has come a long way remarkably quickly. At no point during our admittedly brief stay, did we, as a group of LGBT travellers, feel anything less than welcomed by the local population. English is widely spoken and you're as likely to receive a wink from your waiter here as you are anywhere else, though I doubt your waiter would be as easy on the eye anywhere else!

This was as true in the villages as in the capital, Ljubljana. Occupied variously by Italian fascists, Nazis and communists Ljubljana has survived them all. It even survived a devastating earthquake in 1895, following which it was rebuilt in the Vienna Secession style.

From every viewpoint it's exquisite. Bars and cafés line the banks of the verdant Ljubljanica River that flows through the city, and, in the absence of cars which are banned from the city centre, create one long terrace. Pick a spot, and soak up the atmosphere. Stroll around one of the many markets located off the main drag, or climb the steep incline that leads to the castle which overlooks the city.

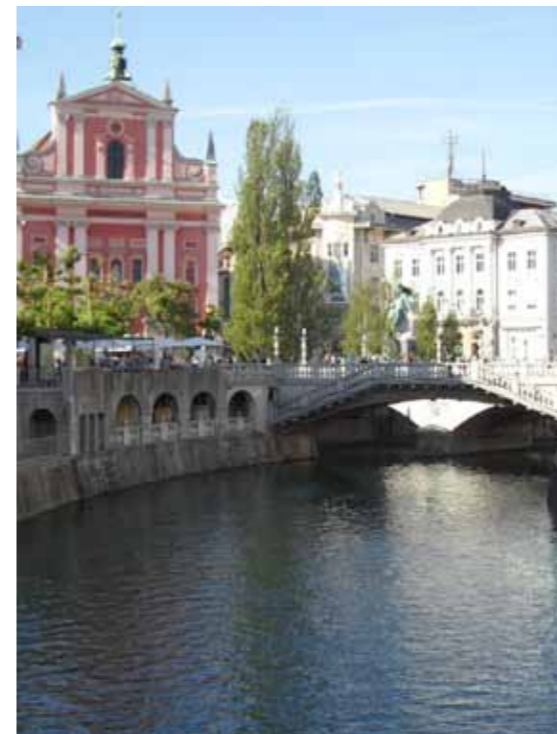
Happily our hotel, the Vander urban resort boasts a roof-top pool and terrace which offers a private view of the castle so we didn't have to. Imaginatively crafted from a row of townhouses the Vander offers the ultimate in boutique chic. Located in the heart of this vibrant city the Vander's cool décor creates the perfect oasis from which to visit Europe's cosiest capital. (Population 300,000). Every comfort is provided at a fraction of the cost you might expect to pay for a similar hotel in a more "glamorous" city location.

Although small, Ljubljana's gay scene is increasingly vibrant, as you would expect from a city with a relatively youthful population. Pink Saturdays are held at Klub K 4 (Kersnikova 4, klub4.org), and gay club Tiffanys offers a space to drink and dance. There is a men only sauna (Gymnasivm, Ulica Pohorskega Bataljona 34, klub-libero.si) and in November the city hosts Europe's oldest LGBT film festival (established 1984). However, as when visiting any unfamiliar city it's always wise to exercise a degree of caution.

Pink Week wraps up with the Dragon Ball, a glittering dinner and dance that takes place in yet another of Ljubljana's stately proportioned architectural gems.

Slovenia might be difficult to pinpoint on a map, but once you've found it, it's unlikely that you won't return. I'm planning my next trip, already, when I will eat and drink less, take part in the cycle marathon from Ljubljana to Goriska Brda in celebration of the Slovenian cherry festival and hike through the forests in search of bears. Maybe...

"Vineyards stretch in every direction and no space is considered too small or too unproductive to grow grapes, and the resulting wines are fabulous"



VIEWS OF OLD LJUBLJANA AND THE BRDA VINEYARDS; BOTTOM RIGHT: THE DRAGON BALL.



PICTURE: GARY GEE



WAY TO GO

Hotel Gredic
Ceglo 9, 5212 Dobrovo, Gredic.si

Hotel Balnea
Dolenjske Toplice, hotelbalnea.com

Vander hotel
Krojaska Ulica 6-8, 1000 Ljubljana, vanderhotel.com

Trip organised by luxuryslovenia.eu



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